

Guide for Managing Sharing Circles

About This Guide

This guide has been written to provide practical information to help ayahuasca facilitators manage their sharing circles.

Sharing the experience in a safe context can be an essential activity to close the session in a meaningful way and begin the integration process properly.

This guide will address theoretical aspects and the philosophy behind sharing circles, as well as give practical advice on how to carry them out.

Philosophy and Intent of Sharing Circles

Sharing circles are usually included after experiences in non-ordinary states of consciousness, but what is the **intention** behind this practice?

Sharing circles can provide a safe space in the hours following an experience for the whole group to come together and interact in a healthy, respectful way. Through sharing and listening to our peers, the understanding of one's own experience is expanded, thereby facilitating the processing and integration phase.

Sharing circles honor the experience of each individual and encourage building social ties and supportive relationships. Sharing circles act as a **meeting point** after the experience is over and as a **transition space back into the everyday world**. This time dedicated to integration allows participants to continue to expand and process their experience. It also allows facilitators **to see all the participants** and get a sense of how each one is doing.

Helpful attitudes for the sharing circle include an attentive, respectful, and loving presence, non-directive support, respect for the inner wisdom of each participant, and allowing time and space for each person's experiences to unfold at their own pace.

The hope is that the sharing circle will be a space of welcoming, recollection, and validation for the participants and that it will create a favorable end to the ceremonial space.

Some Keywords for Sharing Circles

- Confidentiality
- Respect
- Support
- Presence
- Authenticity
- Beauty
- Active listening
- Empathy
- Community
- Security

Structure of Sharing Circles

Sharing circles should follow a certain **structure** which should be planned in advance. The sharing circle is a time capsule within the workshop. It is an activity that remains part of the whole experience, even if the acute effects are already over. In addition, the sharing circles usually take place at the end of the retreat or session and therefore have a significant impact on the overall feeling. How we finish something can define the feeling of the whole experience. For example, a bad dessert can ruin an excellent meal.

The physical space where the group will be held must be comfortable. There needs to be enough seats or cushions for everyone. It should be beautiful and well cared for, perhaps with a centerpiece including flowers or candles. While these

elements are not essential to sharing, will enrich the experience. **The space of the sharing circle, which can be understood as a ceremony in itself, should be taken care of** In the same way that a ceremonial space is.

When designing the sharing circle structure, it is advisable to think about the following:

1. How to **open** the sharing circle
2. How to **facilitate** the experience
3. How to **close** the circle

All participants should be invited to the sharing circle. This is not an optional part, but an essential aspect of the workshop and the experience.

Once all participants are present, the group can **open** with a few seconds of silence and connection. Next, the designated facilitator provides context about how the group will be conducted so that participants know what to expect and how to participate during the activity. A proposal for this information and context can be found below.

The participants are then given the floor. The sharing circle typically runs smoothly, but it is the facilitator's responsibility to maintain the structure and ensure that the interactions that occur during the group are appropriate, safe,, and healthy. Participants are in a potentially vulnerable state, so it is important to continue to take care of the space and offer support to participants through presence and attention. If interactions occur that are outside of the sharing framework, the facilitator should lovingly but firmly re-establish the structure to ensure the safety of all participants.

Once everyone has shared, the group needs to be **closed**. This usually entails thanking the participants for their open-heartedness, and providing some hints and tips on how to continue the integration process. It may be helpful to hand out a printed document with some self-care recommendations post-experience since some people may still be grounding and not absorb the information provided to them at the time.

The following are some guiding principles that can guide the way the sharing circle is conducted or given context. These principles are presented during the opening of the session and serve to create the appropriate container for the group experience.

The 5 Principles

These principles about how to lead sharing circles come from the Holotropic Breathwork™ tradition, developed by Stanislav and Christina Grof and the Grof Transpersonal Training team.

There are **5 guiding principles** on how to manage a sharing circle:

1. Provide a **metaphor**
2. The **purpose** of the sharing group
3. How is it **shared**?
4. How does it **sound**?
5. Keep **time**

1. Provide a metaphor

After a few moments of silence and reconnection, the group space begins by offering an evocative and useful metaphor. The one used most in Holotropic Breathwork™ contexts is that of the nomadic tribe. It can be formulated as follows:

"Welcome back to our circle. We are meeting as a group that has been traveling through amazing places after a long day full of adventures. Everyone has had their own experience,. Perhaps some of you have been contemplating idyllic landscapes, and others may have been climbing dangerous crags or exploring deep caves. We now sit around the fire at the end of the day to tell each other how our experience has been.

2. The purpose of the sharing group

Context must be given for what will take place and why and how it will be done. This includes: allowing time for integration, beginning to elaborate on the

experience by putting words to it, finding a first version of what has happened to us, witnessing the experiences of others, supporting the rest of the group with our own presence, and receiving support from the group.

Any experience in non-ordinary states of consciousness must include three essential parts: **the preparation, the session, and the integration.** Group sharing is part of integrating the experience.

3. How is it shared?

It may be difficult to put the experience into words. There may still be confusion or a lack of clarity. People may still be trying to digest the experience and not be able to narrate what happened. All of that is perfectly fine and respected.

Before sharing it may be a good idea to take a moment to check inside yourself and look for what has "meaning and heart." What is relevant to share with the rest of the group at this time?

It is not mandatory to share. It is fine if someone does not wish to share their experience. *"If you choose not to share what happened during the experience, please let us know at least how you are doing right now."*

If space has been provided for artistic expression, drawing mandalas, or other integration activities, these can be used to guide each participant's sharing.

4. How does it sound?

A sharing circle is not a therapy group. The basic attitudes during the development of the activity should be **respectful, non-directive, and supportive.**

The Grof Transpersonal Training's Holotropic Breathwork™ sharing model trusts that each person knows what to share in that moment and comes to the conclusions that are right for them. Therefore there are certain **things we do NOT do** (neither as facilitators nor as participants):

- Do not act as therapists.
- Do not give feedback or interpretations.
- Do not ask questions or comment about someone else's sharing.
- Do not encourage debate or cross-talk during the sharing circle.
- Do not give advice, nor tell participants what to do or what their experience means.

What is encouraged is to support the group, ensure the smooth and respectful development of sharing, and thank each person for their words.

Each group may have different approaches to sharing. Some do give feedback and interpretations about the experiences of others. In any case, if you feel the need to say something to a participant as a result of sharing, it is useful to ask yourself, *"Is what I want to say to them for them, or is it for me? Is it going to be useful to them, or am I doing it out of my own need?"* It is helpful to be honest with ourselves about the motives that drive us to give feedback or interpretation. Some motives may come from a loving and compassionate place. Others may respond to egoic needs for recognition, the need to be the expert, and other reasons.

5. Keep time

It is often useful to set a time limit for sharing. Some people may feel triggered that there is a time limit to their sharing. But this usually helps both the personal and group dynamics because of time limits:

- Allow the group to run smoothly and finish in a reasonable amount of time
 - Assures that everyone will have time to share if they wish to do so.
- Therefore it honors the experiences of all participants equally.

The time available for each participant will depend on the total time of the group and the number of participants. This time should be announced during the opening phase before the group starts. It can be stated in the following way:

"To make sure that we all have time to share, and that we can finish the session at a reasonable time so that we can get home/ sleep well, we will have a limited time, which will be X minutes per person. Maybe for someone, X minutes seems

insignificant and insufficient to tell everything that has happened. In X minutes, you will probably not have time to tell the whole narrative of your experience. But you will certainly have time to share what has "meaning and heart". For other people X minutes may seem like an eternity. That's fine too. You don't have to use all the time if you don't want to. Once X minutes have passed, you will hear the sound of the bell. It does not mean that you have to end suddenly. But it is a reminder that you should wrap up. If you ignore the bell and continue speaking, you will hear the sound again. If anyone feels they need more time for their sharing, the facilitators will stay at the end of the group and be available if you want to tell us more."

The person designated to keep time and ring the bell should be a different person on the team other than the one leading, opening, and closing the sharing circle. That way the group leader can bring their full presence to the group without having to worry about checking the time. It also helps keep participant dynamics with the team smoother and easier.

Closing the Sharing Circle

Once all participants have shared, it is good practice to give a second chance for those who wish to share more. Often during the experience of sharing and listening to others, emotional and cognitive changes can occur and the experience can evolve. Many people feel that listening to their peers helps them to better integrate their own experiences. The emotional state they start the sharing circle in is different from how they feel at the end (usually for the better!).

So it's okay to say something like, "Does anyone have anything left to share before we close the group?" Usually, there may be a couple of people who want to add something or give a token of gratitude about the experience. When the interventions are finished, be thankful for the experience and find a way to close the day, the experience, or the workshop.

For sharing circles that are not at the end of a workshop or retreat, a few words can be given to provide context about the moment the workshop is taking place. In groups that occur at the end of a workshop, it is helpful to give context about what may happen next and give some integration tips. This can include

information about the confidentiality of what has been discussed in the sharing circle, dietary restrictions to be followed, what to expect after an experience, recommendations about making or not making important decisions after experiences in non-ordinary states, and anything that is considered appropriate in the context of the ceremony or session.

Ending with words of gratitude is always a good example to expand future possibilities. The tradition of Holotropic Breathwork™ likes to thank the creators of the technique, Stan and Christina, as well as the teachers and mentors who have accompanied us. The people who helped organize and set up the workshop can also be thanked. Thanks can also go to the participants for their trust in the experience and for their time and dedication.

We hope you find these reflections on sharing circles useful and that they help you to create more compassionate, safe, and caring practices for the participants and the whole community that work with plants along our journey.

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